DAWN

OPINION

PM's optimism

PRIME Minister Shehbaz Sharif's declaration on New Year's Eve that the government would exit crisis mode — "with macroeconomic indicators stabilised" — and shift towards growth is more a political statement than an economic message. His remarks, in fact, betrayed the ruling party's anxiety over the criticism that the government lacked a programme to move the economy from stabilisation to growth. The broad reform agenda rolled out by the PM comprises 142 actions — 59 priority reforms and 83 complementary measures — to be implemented by 58 institutions within defined timelines. The key areas where actions are to be implemented include taxation, energy, privatisation, SOEs, pensions, tariff rationalisation, regulatory simplification, rightsizing of the federal government and digital governance. Describing his new reform agenda as a shift from crisis management to institution-building, Mr Sharif said the programme was "home-grown" and "irreversible", boosting institutional stability and supporting sustainable growth led by the private sector.

The economy has undoubtedly come a long way from the days when it was on the brink. Headline macroeconomic fundamentals have shown improvements over the last couple of years. Inflation has come down sharply, foreign exchange reserves have increased significantly, and the twin current account and fiscal deficits have been drastically slashed. These improvements are advanced by the government as evidence that its — politically costly — decisions have delivered stability. But is this stability strong enough to shoulder future growth? After all, this stabilisation has been achieved by suppressing growth at the expense of productivity, development spending and job losses, and is founded more on bilateral debt rollovers than increased exports or investment. Although the tax-to-GDP ratio has moved up to above 10pc, the increase is not an outcome of structural reforms like broadening the tax base. Rather, it has been achieved by further burdening captive taxpayers such as salaried individuals and compliant organised businesses. Likewise, the government has offloaded PIA but it could not have been possible without a slew of tax and other concessions for the buyer. Nor did it attract any foreign investor.

Hence, the PM's argument that the worst is over and the focus can now shift from management to medium-term reforms and growth is set to be tested no sooner than the economy is put back on a faster growth trajectory. The government is making a strong political and economic case that Pakistan has stabilised after a near-crisis and that reform momentum is now irreversible. The real test, however, lies in whether this stabilisation can translate into durable growth, exports, jobs and investor confidence — areas in which Pakistan has historically struggled once the crisis pressure eases. The desire for stronger growth notwithstanding, the economy is unlikely to come out of low-growth mode unless the government actually walks the talk and reforms are fast-tracked.

Just a handshake

IT was a handshake that sent a ripple through the region. On Wednesday, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq and India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar shook hands in Dhaka, where they had both arrived to attend the state funeral of former Bangladeshi prime minister Khaleda Zia, who passed away earlier this week. It was, doubtless, a significant moment which invited attention across three countries. The Chief Adviser of the Government of Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, made note of it in a post on his X account, which stated that the two men had "exchanged greetings" during their interaction ahead of the funeral programme organised for Ms Zia. Pictures of the two, sombrely attired for the occasion, accompanied his post. Indian media downplayed the event, framing the handshake as a usual nicety at such events and therefore inconsequential. The Pakistani media, noting that it was the first high-level contact between the two nations since the May hostilities, ran with the statement issued by the National Assembly Secretariat, underlining the part where it claimed that the handshake and pleasantries had been initiated by Mr Jaishankar, who reportedly approached Mr Sadiq with an informal acknowledgement.

One reason for the interest could be that this is a slow time of the year for newsrooms. Another could be that anticipation has continuously been high for what happens next between Pakistan and India. Yet, given the prevailing atmosphere, not much can or should be read into a mere handshake. Interestingly, the NA Secretariat's statement on the 'handshake' notes that Pakistan has "consistently emphasised dialogue, restraint and cooperative measures, including proposals for peace talks and joint investigations into the alleged false flag Pahalgam incident, in order to prevent unprovoked aggression and escalation". Can this be read as a signal to New Delhi that the door to talks remains open? Unfortunately, the hostile rhetoric and posturing from next door show no signs of relenting. Recent reports regarding plans for controversial hydropower projects by India, which would violate the Indus Waters Treaty, are designed to be provocations for further tensions between the two states. There is, without question, a strong need for temperatures to be brought down. But handshakes and exchanging pleasantries alone will not make that happen. It will require earnest effort, especially on New Delhi's part, and diplomacy at the highest levels before a thaw can be expected.

NYC's new mayor

ZOHRAN Mamdani's swearing in as mayor of New York City places him at the helm of one of the world's most complex cities. His rise has been rapid, polarising and noted globally, and these factors will shape the challenges ahead. Few modern mayors have assumed office amid such sharp political divisions or intense scrutiny, particularly with limited experience in executive public office. For Mr Mamdani, the margin for error is thin. NYC is not a forgiving political environment. Its residents form strong opinions early and rarely revise them generously. The mayor's first 100 days will therefore matter disproportionately, not only for policy outcomes but for perception. Competence, clarity and discipline will be as important as ideology. Early mistakes such as administrative confusion, or messaging errors are likely to be magnified by critics. Mr Mamdani appears to understand this reality. His recent, low-key engagement with President Donald Trump suggested a willingness to separate symbolism from governance and to act pragmatically when required. That instinct will be essential. Many of his flagship promises, including taxing the wealthy to fund childcare, freezing rents, making buses free or lowering food costs depend on cooperation from the governor and state legislature, institutions not naturally inclined to embracing democratic socialism.

This gap between ambition and power is well known. Left-leaning reform efforts have often stumbled when they meet budget limits, legal barriers and entrenched economic systems. Yet dismissing Mr Mamdani's programme as naive would miss its deeper logic. Many of his proposals are modest, practical and intensely local: improved access to affordable food, streamlined procurement and reduced police contact with vulnerable populations. One magazine writing about Mr Mamdani quoted writer Raymond Williams: "To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing." The new mayor's task is to translate mobilisation into governance and to do it patiently and credibly — in full view of a sceptical city.

BY FAISAL BARI

Words without actions

Children are shaped by what they see their parents, family elders and teachers do.

MOST conversations on educational issues in Pakistan, sooner than later, come to the topic of 'values' in our society — our young people in particular. People lament that values have changed and the change has been for the worse: young people just do not possess the values that older generations held. Empathy, tolerance and community feeling are often mentioned as prime examples of values we need badly but do not have or have lost to a large extent over time. The conversation then focuses on how curricula, textbooks and teaching should be changed to facilitate the inculcation of these values.

This is all good — and yes, curricula, textbooks, teachers and teaching should definitely engage with the issue of values. In fact, we have always done that in education. Society has an interest in shaping how young people think and grow up and what they become. This is an essential part of the meaning of the very word 'education'. But we should also remember that children learn much more from what they see adults doing around them and what they read, hear and watch on television, social media and within their social circles. They are shaped by what they see their parents, family elders and teachers do. Children learn from examples and what they see — far more than from what they might be asked to read/reproduce for assignments and examinations. If the two are not in line, curricula, books, lectures and lessons are likely to fall on deaf ears.

Do religious minorities have the rights all citizens should? There are minorities in Pakistan who are even afraid to divulge their identity lest they be punished for just that. Even majorities have difficulty practising their religion freely. People are afraid to talk about religious issues in public and have internalised fear and self-censorship. A look at newspapers from a few months reveals countless reports of incidents where minorities and even individuals from majority communities have been victims.

Those in power have decided to use power to secure their own interests (and longevity) rather than those of the public. If a judge or a few judges are deemed to be too independent or are disliked for one reason or another, the Constitution, law, rules, regulations, practice, everything can be changed to ensure that they are sidelined, are made out to be culprits, have their reputations ruined, or are forced to leave or become ineffective.

If a journalist is disliked, we have him/her fired. Programmes are taken off-air, columnists are stopped from being able to write in papers. If a paper is deemed too 'independent' their advertisement revenue is restricted or other normal operations made difficult. Channels are taken off air. If these have required tightening of the laws, it has been done. But often, a call to the relevant newspaper or channel is enough of a threat given how the state has been handling these issues.

The state has weaponised the law against the citizens and in many domains. There are new laws against posting on social media, there are new laws against journalists, and laws are tightened around public protests. How the political opposition has been and is being treated is very clear. We need not say more on that.

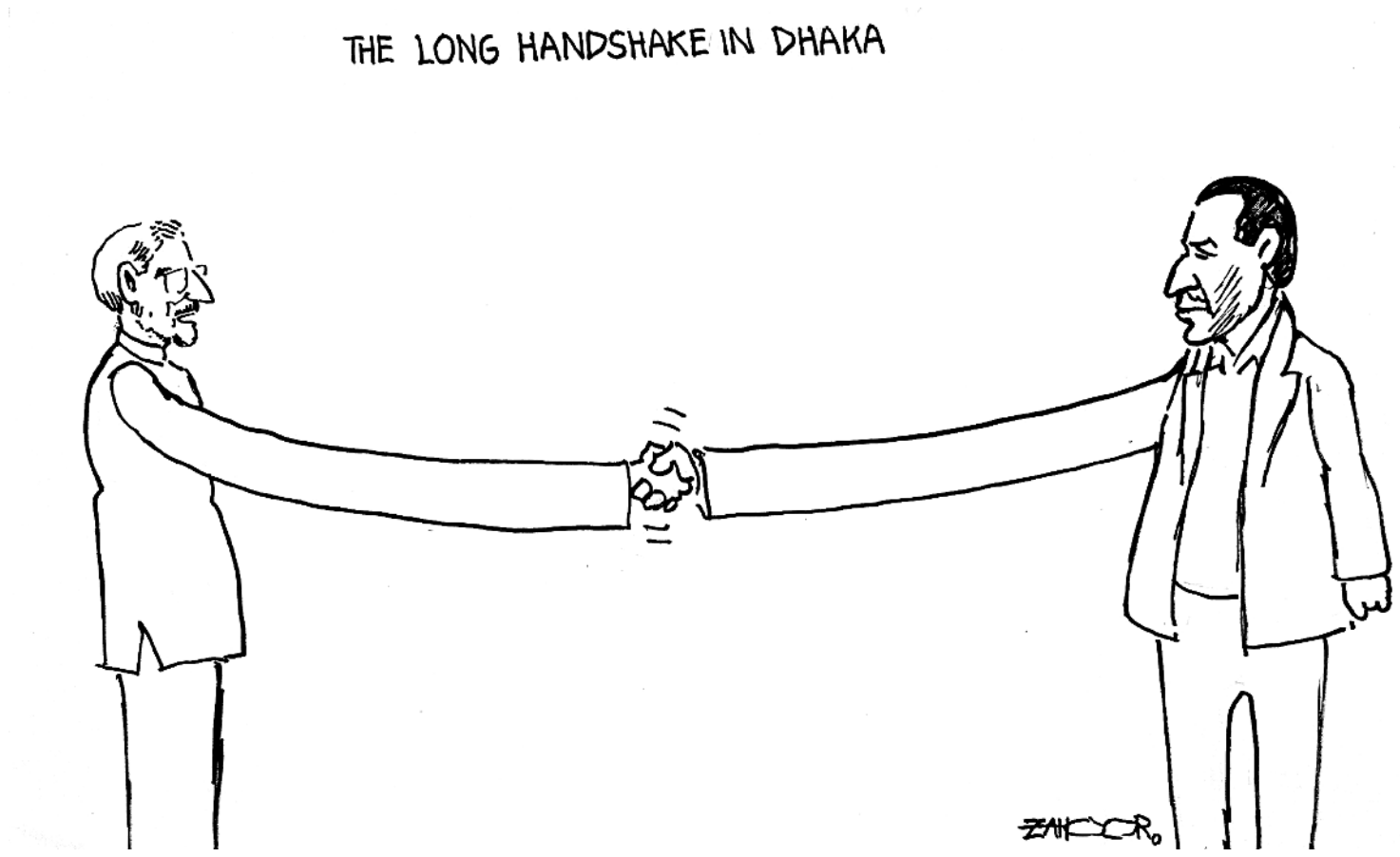
FIRs are used as a weapon. If the state does not like an individual and/or wants to give them a warning, all they have to do is register a case against them under any of the laws mentioned or start an investigation even before an FIR is registered. Even if the investigation is eventually closed or an FIR quashed, there will be months, sometimes years, of appearances before law-enforcement agencies and courts. The expenses and time consumed can be ruinous. The state knows this well but has, sadly, used it and is using it quite effectively against citizens they may not like for some reason.

The right to public protest has become almost impossible to exercise and has been nearly criminalised. The use of Section 144 when a protest is expected gives the state the right to register FIRs against those who come out to protest and then face the wrath of the law for months and years. Charges like 'obstruction of law-enforcement officers' or 'resisting law-enforcement officers', 'causing public nuisance', 'obstruction of traffic', etc, are easy to weaponise against protesters and they have been weaponised. Every protest is deemed to be anti-state and a violation of the law. Every dissent is seen as dangerous to the integrity and sovereignty of the state.

And then we say we should teach our children values like empathy and tolerance through books and classes. Are they not able to see what is happening around them? Do they not hear what is being said on news and chat programmes every day? Do they not have friends, relatives and elders who talk about these issues in their social spaces? How can they take what we give them in books and classes as important when they live in a society that violates these values and norms all the time as a matter of law as well as a matter of pride?

As a society we need to think deep and hard about where we are and where we want to go. Some measures might seem desirable to ensure short-term survival but might have a very corrosive impact for us in the medium to long run. Those in power today have taken the state to such a place. This does not bode well for people who are facing all this but, just as importantly if not more so, it does not bode well for what we are likely to give our children and leave them in terms of values, institutions and practices. May 2026 be a year of reflection and course correction for us. ■

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives and an associate professor of economics at Lums.



BY USAMA KHILJI

Criminalising free speech

IF post-2016 were the years when Peca's misuse against those exercising their right to freedom of speech and press freedom was tested, 2025 was the year when the gaps in the state's ability to fully abuse the law were filled.

The amendments to Peca were made in an opaque manner and passed by parliament in January 2025 without any consultations, public debate, or even parliamentary debate. Those of us who managed to attend a hearing at a Senate committee were informed that the members had been told to vote for the amendment as it was, with no room for any changes. Senators said that the amended law would not be used against journalists, but like most promises this was also immediately broken as was clear from the intent behind the amendments.

The results of this opaque, undemocratic process have been damaging in terms of the kind of changes made to the law; how cases have been filed against lawyers, journalists, and activists; and the chilling effect this has had on citizens and the media alike.

Wide-ranging procedural and substantive changes in Peca have been highly damaging. The National Cybercrime Investigation Authority (NCCIA) was formed under the law, which is essentially a new name for the FIA's cybercrime wing, the investigation authority under Peca since 2016. Only 15 reporting centres exist currently with an in-person reporting requirement, which serves as a significant barrier for people to register a complaint leading to a case under Peca. The 2025 amendment undid a December 2023 amendment to Peca that had permitted complaints under the law to be filed at any police station in Pakistan.

Moreover, the 2025 amendment changed the definition of a complainant to be any person "having substantial reasons to believe that the offence has been committed" in addition to the "victim", which significantly expands the ability to file a case — from an aggrieved person to any third party. The other significant change is that now the complainant does not have to be a "natural person" but can be any organisation, including a government department. Another significant change in definition includes expanding "social media platform" to include "any person that owns, provides or manages online information system for provision of social media or social network service", which expands the purview of the law to people administering online groups or channels as well.

The amendment further criminalises free speech in the country by introducing Section 26-A that stipulates punishment of three years in jail and/or Rs2 million fine for "false or fake information", without defining what that entails. The amendment also makes Section 20, which was struck down by the Islamabad High Court in 2022 but continues to be used illegally, cognisable and non-bailable. These two sections are responsible for criminalising free speech on the internet in Pakistan at a time when over 90 countries have decriminalised defamation, something that the IHC tried doing.

In practice, the 2025 Peca amendment has given the state through the NCCIA a free hand to prosecute any person that is seen as critical of state policies. In a constitutional democratic republic, the consequences of this are disastrous. And any constitutional protections that may exist in theory have been blurred after the 27th Amendment where the role of the executive in the appointment of judges has been expanded, with their ability to transfer judges without oversight.

> Peca is being used against lawyers, journalists and human rights defenders.

Several journalists have been called in, in 2025, by the NCCIA for inquiries under Peca related to their work. For instance, Farhan Mallick, the founder of independent media platform Raftar, was arrested in February 2025 under Peca charges. Hum News journalist Khalid Jamil was arrested in Islamabad in August 2025 under Peca. Muhammad Aslam from Vehari has a case under Peca for reporting on alleged corruption in a road project. Iftikhar Ul Hassan of Samaa news from Vehari also had a Peca case against him by the municipal authority for a social media post about actions by local administration against a housing society. Muhammad Akbar Notezai of this paper was sent prosecution notices by the FIA for a corruption investigation which the RSF and Freedom Network have highlighted as retaliation against investigative reporting. In July 2025, upon NCCIA's request, an Islamabad court ordered the blocking of 27 YouTube channels of journalists for "anti-Pakistan" reporting, some of which were later suspended upon appeal.

Peca is also being used against lawyers and human rights defenders. For instance, in the case of human rights lawyers Imaan Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha, a Peca case filed by the NCCIA relates to seven tweets from the year 2021 posted by Imaan Mazari on matters of the law, human rights, and enforced disappearances in the country, and Chattha's supposed crime is reposting these tweets. The Supreme Court had to step in to direct the lower courts in Islamabad to follow due process and procedure in the case where multiple hearings were being held on the same day, and witness statements being recorded in the absence of the accused. During cross-questioning, the NCCIA official stated that government officials are allowed to say the same things that the couple is being prosecuted for saying.

In such an environment, journalists and lawyers are being turned into heroes for simply doing their jobs as that itself has become an act of courage. A parliament that passes laws without deliberation, an executive that arrests its citizens for exercising their right to freedom of speech, and a judiciary that does not protect the rights of citizens that it functions for need a reminder of the notion of fundamental rights and justice.

It is unsustainable for a regime to carry on with such oppression in a diverse republic like Pakistan. It is fundamental that citizens be allowed to express their opinions with the safety of their institutions rather than be victimised them. For that, parliament must undo these draconian amendments and decriminalise defamation. ■

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